

# What Can Architects do Today to Improve the Living Conditions for the Urban Poor?



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## 1 Introduction

The Philippines has for a long time had the highest rates of urbanization in the world. Natural growth and migration from rural to urban areas has caused congestion in the capital cities, especially in Metro Manila (Valenciano, p.150). Immigration together with income inequality and lack of economic growth has caused poverty among people (Tabèze, 2014, p.141). The fact is that 20% of the urban population fall below the income poverty line, and 60-80% consider themselves poor (Valenciano p.151). This situation has forced many people to settle down in slum areas where they are exposed to risks. The conditions are below what any human being should stand and relocation is a must.

The overcrowdings cause problems with increasing demand of housing, which causes rising prices of land. In Metro Manila the cost of land have been rising by almost 25% annually (Valenciano, p.153). This has resulted in constrains in providing affordable housing. In many housing developments in Metro Manila this stress can be shown in poor and unsustainable housing and neighbourhood designs.

One specific sector, agency or stakeholder cannot change the situation since the poverty problem is very complex. Neither can anything happen if the different actors blame each other for limiting their possibilities to make a difference. Everyone has to do what he or she can to help people to better living standards, which hopefully in the end result in a way out from the poverty trap.

In this paper I am going to look at how we as architects can take our responsibility to do our best in today's challenging situation. I ask myself, what can we as architects do to make the living conditions better for the urban poor?

## 2 Urban Shelter Development

### How have Architects in History Worked with Planning and Housing in the Rapidly Urbanizing World?

In history there have been different ways of planning for cities and housing in the third world. The evolution has gone from the post-Second World War year's plans by foreign professionals to participation of the people in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The development of the planning manners has been an evolutionary process of reactions against failures in previous ways of planning, and has eventually led to how architects work today.

#### **Master Planning**

Master planning was developed during the inter-war period and widely applied during the post-Second World War years (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p. 130). It was a very detailed large-scale plan showing the exact disposition of all land uses, activities and suggested development. The planning were often prepared by foreign professional planners who used the same guidelines that they were used to in Western Europe at the time, e.g. modern movement ideals with separated transport routes with motor cars prioritised (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p. 131). What happened was that the local people didn't accept these non-adopted plans and therefore the implementation costs got very high. Other difficulties with master planning was that the rapidly changing urban development almost

immediately made the rigid master plan out of date and therefore unrelated to the reality.

Furthermore the master plans undervalued the future urban population growth by having a negative view of urban growth from the start. One of the principal aims were to limit the city growth since there was an idea of an optimal size, beyond which the growth would be negative due to congestion, rising economic costs and social breakdown (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p. 130).

One other critique against master planning was that the focus tend to be more on the plan as a product rather than what affects it caused. Many politicians were interested in having a plan but did not seem interested in applying it fully. (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p. 132-133).

If we today evaluate the master plans that had been made in history we find few successful developments in the third world (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p. 131). But despite this master planning is still a dominating way when trying to control urban development in the rapid urbanising world (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p. 133).

## **Regional Planning**

Regional planning was applied at the same time as master planning but came as a response to the increasing complexity of economic and social interactions (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p. 130, 135). It was based on the idea of identifying growth poles around a city that had the best possibilities for rapid industrial growth and concentrate investment there. The goal was to deal with decongestion in cities by redirecting the growth from the primary cities to the growth poles (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p. 136).

Neither have few of these developments been successful. The reason why is because it had weaknesses in the strategy. It both required of large capital outlays, lacked adequate analyses, and didn't address the real regional problem, e.g. it

reinforced large-scale industrialisation instead of improving agriculture (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p. 136).

### **Structure Planning**

Structure planning came in the mid 1960's as a reaction against the master plans. Instead of having rigid and limiting detailed plans a new approach were introduced. It had a base structure within which more detailed local plans could be developed. One major difference in this way of planning compared with master planning was the thinking of urban areas as constantly changing. This approach required more trend data and analyses of these to be able to draw the plans. As a result the responsibility of planning were divided into smaller districts and departments. Despite positive innovations was the structural planning principle not largely adopted in the rapid urbanizing world (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p. 137-139).

### **Action Planning**

Action planning was another response to the failures in master planning. It was developed by practitioners who reacted against that they needed more effective tools in the urban planning. The idea was to identify strategic key issues and problems that could be affected immediately, followed by specifying roles of different agencies to be responsible of different parts of the action programme, such as detailed planning, financing, legalising etc. Information about the process were collected and used as input to the plan and programme revision (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p. 139). This process minimized the amount of data needed for planning but also identified the most important tasks that could be useful for funding. (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p. 139-140).

However, the community action planning opened up for community involvement in the process and a new era in planning, the participatory planning era (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p. 140).

## **Participatory Planning**

Participatory planning came also as a reaction against the failures in modern planning, where external professionals made the plans for the people. Instead participatory planning aimed to work from the bottom and up, in direct contact with the locals. In that way the planning process was simpler and more cost efficient (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p.147-148).

In the 1970s the participatory planning was used in settlement upgrading projects. But the way they worked then were not optimal. In worst cases participation was only labour. Later in the 1980s and 1990s the UN-funded programmes and projects focused more on giving the communities the tools to manage their own development, but still support them with knowledge from professionals (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p.148-149).

## **Self-Help Housing**

One way of participation was self-help housing. Instead of having the government providing housing for free households could manage the construction themselves as a way to reduce the building costs (Santos-Delgado.p.59).

Governments in the colonial period experimented with forms of assistance for people to build their own houses in urban areas. The concept was often used in core countries in times of crisis (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p.158). But in the early 1970s the self-help housing approach started to implement as an alternative to the failing modernisation development strategies. Soon it was established as the official alternative for low-income developments (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p.162).

In the early 1970s the focus was on sites and services areas since it was hard to find any affordable land. This resulted in a shift in focus from new developments to upgrading of existing informal settlements in the late 1970s. Even though the focus had shifted new developments were being planned since de-densification of the city centres was still desperately needed (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p.162).

One decade later the field of self-help housing extended to include employment activities and community organisations, since an increased income was needed to make the upgrading affordable. Later in the mid 1980s and early 1990s the upgrading and delivery of sites and services continued, but the focus shifted from the individual project to the program. It was done to not come in conflict with the general urban and economic development of the city as a whole (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p.162).

The arguments for the self-help housing approach were that people living in the neighbourhoods knew what they needed better than government officials and high regulatory standards. The people could also use their resources more efficient, which made the houses more affordable. The projects become more individual when the houses were adapted to the users not the market (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p.161). It did not only meet each households needs but also strengthened the sense of community among the people (Santos-Delgado.p.59).

The evaluations in the 1980s of the projects built in the 1970s showed that the cost savings were small or non-existent in self-help housing projects.

Unfortunately the results also showed that gentrification had occurred in many of the projects meant for low-income families. Furthermore had many of the self-help houses had problems with maintenance that more or less had turned them back to being slums again (Jenkins, Smith, Ping Wang, p.166).

### 3 Urban Shelter Design

#### What Can Architects Do Today to Improve the Living Conditions for the Urban Poor?

By evaluating planning manners from the past and successfully made projects we can see that there are certain key issues that are important to succeed with a project. In this part I look further into those key issues, which concern both the planning and building process but also regulatory processes and ownerships.

## **Participation of The People**

First of all we have learned from the failures in planning in history that one major key issue to succeed with a project is to let people participate in the planning and building process. It is important for several different reasons, but to start with one it is important for getting to know the site and under what social, economical and technical conditions the projects are being made. One way of collecting information is to have a good integration and communication with the inhabitants. In that way important knowledge, information and experience can be shared. After all it is the people who knows their surroundings and way of living, information that is necessary for architects in order to create good living spaces. Many times the people even know what they want but they don't know how to do it. In those cases the architect's role is to act as a consultant that provides the people with their technical knowledge (Tabèze. 2014. p.67).

To succeed with establishing a good contact with the people is a gentle approach from the professionals to the people essential. Many architects tend to see themselves as the person who knows the most about the built, which could be read as arrogance that repels the people (Tabèze. 2014. p.68).

But to get everybody's perspective into the building process can be hard, but necessary to create fair and including designs. Today there is a range of different new innovative ways to optimize the engagement of the people with computers. One example is from Kenya where Minecraft has been used to engage younger people in the upgrading of the slums. In Minecraft the people have been able to use their creativity to build up their neighbourhood in the computer as they want it. It is fun but also gives a clear vision of what could be done in their surrounding (Block by block.2013)

Furthermore it is important to find out what the people want to change, in which order they prioritise them and what budget they have for the improvements (Johansson. Åstrand. p.95). Therefore it is very important with detailed pre-studies on each project. Detailed pre-studies lead to faster developing process and more efficient improvements to a lower cost. (Johansson. Åstrand. p.94)

After that is being done it is very important to inform the people what is going to happen in the project. In this way people embrace the project and feel safe with it. But it is also important to inform about what and how the houses are being built in order to educate and get acceptance from the people when introducing something new e.g. a new building material (Johansson. Åstrand. p.95-96).

Further it is very good to continue the cooperation with the people in the construction stage of the building process, as a way of making the projects work in the longer perspective. By giving people knowledge about the built they are also given the opportunity to extend and repair their houses in a good way in the future (Tabèze, 2014, p.67). In this way the maintenance of the neighbourhood is being better which prevents the neighbourhood from turning into a slum area. As written before that was exactly what happened in the first participatory projects in the 1970s, when the idea was not fully developed and applied.

One way of making people participate in the construction is to do self-help housing projects where people do the main part of the construction themselves. It is not only a good way of implementing new ideas but also a good way to make great improvements with people's tight budget (Johansson. Åstrand. p.96).

However the participation of the people in the housing development is not only important to create good designs but also to make people realize their potentials and take ownership of processes, facilities and interventions that will impact their livelihoods in a later stage (Majale. Payne. 2004. p.103).

### **Security of Tenure**

One other thing that has been important in making successful housing for urban poor is to give them legal right to their land (Johansson. Åstrand. p.97). Security, knowing that you can live in your house for a long time without getting evicted, together with an affordable housing is two basic needs for making people improve and invest in their livelihoods (Majale. Payne. 2004. p.55).



A legal title can also be used as a tool to strengthen groups in the society. In one project in four villages around San Pedro Sulas in Honduras the ownership of the land was used to strengthen the social and economical situation for women in the area. It was done by given the rights to the women in the household, which put them in charge of their own and their family's social and economical situation (Johansson. Åstrand. p.51).

However ownership of land is not always the best choice of security of tenure because it can sometimes benefit the rich more then it helps the poor. It has shown that the poor either sell or lose their land when getting a legal title (Majale. Payne. 2004. p.55). One example from a site and service project in Nairobi, Kenya, was that people tried to make money out of the poor by offering them a relatively small amount of money in exchange for their land. Since the poor were in desperate need for money to make it through the day they accepted the offer. Instead of building a house for one family on the plot the new owner of the land built a house with poor standard that could fit as many families as possible to maximize the income from rents. The result of this is that the rich got even richer while the poor continues to live in poverty, without security of tenure. (Åstrand. 2014). When that is the situation it is better to offer rental contracts that is hard to change ownership of (Johansson. Åstrand. p.98).

## **Regulatory Frameworks**

More bureaucratic ways of affecting the housing of the urban poor is to try to change regulatory frameworks (planning regulations, planning standards and administrative procedures) since they are limiting the architects work in developing adequate housing for urban poor. They were often formulated at a time when urban populations were small and urban growth was low and have a huge impact on physical, economical, social and technological environments of poor communities that affects their livelihoods (Majale. Payne. 2004. p.25).

The regulatory frameworks work against the development of housing for urban poor in many ways but they are generally making it hard to meet the needs and the budget for the urban poor. They often make it impossible for people to have

income top-up business where they live, the administrative procedures often cost a lot and taking a lot of time and many times costly bribes are needed to get the necessary documents (Majale. Payne. 2004. p.50).

Another way is to create a critical mass to stimulate regulatory change. It is not only a way to make real change, but also to guarantee the continuity of initiatives. The once leading the critical mass could be NGOs, reform minded politicians, civil servants and municipal officials, the media, the private sector, the research community and professional associations (Majale. Payne. 2004. p.104),

Furthermore it is especially important to take advantage of opportunities of change, for example new government, policy or unexpected event. Those could be the opening for changes in regulatory frameworks as long as action is taken place quickly before the opportunity is gone (Majale. Payne. 2004. p.108).

But a reform of regulatory frameworks that are beneficial for poor will be almost impossible to achieve without political will. It is essential at every level for implementing new successful collaborations and spread the interventions (Majale. Payne. 2004. p.110). However any change can't be made without professionals, including architects, stand up for what they consider to be the minimum acceptable living standards (Majale. Payne. 2004. p.110). One example from the Philippines is that they have regulations that says that every human should have  $14\text{m}^3$  of air in their living space, which for a family with members of five is equal to  $25\text{m}^2$  floor area with 2,8m to the ceiling, but not even the governments development follow this regulations and continues to built apartments of  $18\text{m}^2$ .

By publishing research findings, particularly in the popular media political will can be increased (Majale. Payne. 2004. p.103). Nowadays we have a huge impact through out Instagram, Facebook and twitter. Uploaded information can be spread world wide in a short period of time, reaching all kinds of people. This is a powerful tool that can be used to put stubborn politicians under pressure.

## **Architects Working in Different Institutions**

But there is not only architects working hands-on with a project that can contribute to better housing for the poor. There are architects working in a range of different institutions with the same issue but from different directions. Within these different institutions architects work differently and therefore need different skills to be able to argue for their ideas with other architects and professionals, both within their own institutions and with others.

The different institutions are:

- Local governments with the primary responsibility to provide housing
- International institutions such as the UN and the World Bank
- Financial institutions that provide housing loans
- Non governmental organizations that organizes communities and households to take an active part in the development of a project
- Northern countries that assist with aids and projects, people organizations and community-based organizations that support negotiations tenure and housing but also self-help construction
- Universities with architectural, engineering and planning departments help with building partnerships with local actors e.g. National Housing Authority (NHA) which is a governmental agency in the Philippines with the focus of providing housing for low income families.

(Baybay.p.7) (Tabèze, 2014, p.145).

One example of a local government where architects are working is the National Housing Authority in the Philippines, a governmental agency that is in charge of housing production on national level for the poorest 30% of the population. They are responsible for providing land and coordinate infrastructure provision, like health care centres, schools and livelihood establishments (Valenciano. p.154-155). The projects both concern resettlement programmes, community mortgage programmes, slum upgrading and cooperative housing, emergency housing

assistance, temporary shelter and evacuation centres production (Valenciano. p.154-155).

One other example from the Philippines are TAO-Pilipinas, a women-led, non governmental organizations where architects, environmental and urban planners and engineers work side by side as technical support for participatory community building for the urban and rural poor (Tao Pilipinas. 2014). They work with human settlements and environment programs, research and publications, education and training in e.g. solid waste management (Baybay.p.9).

Also when it comes to education architects can work to strengthen the subject of social housing in developing countries among students of architecture and urban design. Today a big problem is that projects in this field comes secondary and one of the reasons are lack of teaching and therefore also training for both students and professionals (Tabèze, 2014, p.43). This concerns both western and developing countries. In the Philippines designing for the urban poor have a very low status among both professionals and architecture students. It was found in interviews with professionals but also shown in thesis work presentations at the UP (University of the Philippines) College of Architecture in Manila. The main focus of the projects was on the building design and technical drawings and not the people. However the architect Maria Faith Y. Varona, an architect and environmental planner from TAO-Pilipinas is involved in the architectural education at UP College of Architecture, in attempt to strengthen the status of social housing among students and teachers.

Another way of dealing with this issue in western countries is first of all to introduce the topic in the architecture schools. It is important that this topic is raised among architecture students in rich countries since it doesn't come naturally when we don't deal directly with the problem. This encourage architecture students to be involved in this field which is a world wide problem that needs as much input as possible.

## 4 The Importance of Architects in Housing Design for Urban Poor

One problem today is that the role of architects in institutions and housing projects for the poor is secondary. International Union of Architects and International Architectural Foundation have played a major role to change this but still only 3% of the projects involve an architect (Tabèze, 2014, p.113). This is an alarming figure because architects expertise is very important in a project since they are the ones with the overall picture. By having architects involved in projects we are able to create designs that lasts long on several different levels. Architects have the knowledge to design sustainable neighbourhoods that allows for future changed needs on both family and society level. It could involve planning for changed lifestyles, family expansion, changed use of motor vehicles, raised sea level, etc. A flexible and adaptable design could still function in future while a design that can't needs further costly rebuilding.

Further more are architects the ones knowing how to design for people. It is important for making people use what is being built. Otherwise it would only be a waste of money. Architects know how to affect people's behaviour with design, e.g. by creating neighbourhoods and housing that allows people to grow and take care of their environment. A poor design could in fact increase crime and destruction, which we have seen examples of in history.

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